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ABSTRACT

The paper presents 45 questions teachers have about education of Alaska Native students, and answers to those questions. Teachers are cautioned to avoid assuming that White, middle-class society and Standard English are the only acceptable standards, to be aware of differences in culture and values between Native groups and between Natives and Whites, and to avoid stereotyping of Native students. A question on emphasizing the importance of literacy to students' future lives evokes a response that it might be better to bring literacy instruction into line with actual out-of-school needs so it would make more sense to students. Other questions address communication with Native parents, student motivation and expectations, effects of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, and orientation of new teachers from outside Alaska. Improving teacher effectiveness, fostering students' leadership abilities, helping students with career plans and long-range planning, and learning about differences in culture and communication patterns are covered. Teachers are warned that awareness of cultural differences can produce negative as well as positive results, and that apparent hostility (lack of response) in students may actually be an expression of respect or caution. Preparing students to cope with an unaware or hostile world is discussed. (MH)

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Teachers' Questions About Alaska Native Education

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Draft, November 1981

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Teachers' Questions about Alaska Native Education

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Throughout the State of Alaska are many teachers who are concerned about problems they encounter in the teaching of Alaska Native students. Most of the teachers in the State come from outside of the state and find their experiences teaching here both exciting and challenging but at the same time they often feel that they are not fully successful in helping their students develop their full potential.

During the past several years I have been giving workshops in interethnic communication throughout the state. As a regular practice I have asked teachers in these workshops to write out questions they have so that in my presentations I can speak directly to the problems they feel they have, rather than just speaking on the issues that I feel might be important. Now that my collection of questions is getting fairly large I am beginning to see that many teachers, even in very different cultural settings have quite similar needs and concerns about Alaska Native Education.

This article presents quite a few of these questions, just as they have been written out and given to me by teachers throughout the State. The answers that I give to the questions here are to the best of my recollection the answers I have given in the workshops where the questions were first asked.

I hope that these questions and answers will be of help to you as a teacher of Alaska Native students. These answers are my answers. Other people might answer somewhat differently. I want to thank the many teachers and other school district personnel that I have discussed these questions with both for stimulating our discussions with these questions and for their patience in listening to my answers.

The Questions:

What can we do about students who do not seem to have high enough goals? Some of them only seem to want to become fishermen. How can we motivate students?

There might really be two problems here, one is the motivation of students and the other is recognizing or accepting the motivations that students have. There is a tendency for us as teachers to consider academic and professional activities to be

preferable to other activities such as fishing. I happen to like fish myself and depend totally on someone else doing the fishing. I need to remember that if I want a fisherman to respect my career activities such as university teaching and research and support those activities through his tax dollars I need to also respect his knowledge and expertise.

We may need to remember that for everyone it is rapidly becoming a very different world. I know of a couple of Alaska Native men who have formed a small flying service in a remote area of the State. They are currently installing a microcomputer to do their scheduling and accounting. I'm not convinced that our schools have high enough goals. Are we really preparing our students in such areas as small business computer applications so that if they do make the choice of being a fisherman they will have the business and technical skills to be a good fisherman?

We might be able to address the problem of motivation by recognizing the motivations that students have and strengthening their interests, rather than trying to divert those interests into other areas that in our own society we happen to treat with more prestige.

How can we help Native students make more defined career plans?

There could be a problem of wording here. Do we want students to make more defined career plans or to tell us the career plans they have? I believe that many students have quite clear career plans, plans that they have arrived at on their own or together with their families. The problem is that for many students it is felt to be inappropriate to talk a lot about their plans. It is felt to be a form of bragging.

Many Native groups in the State have a traditional concept that it is dangerous to speak openly of ones plans. If I am going out hunting traditionally I don't say, "I'm going out after the moose I saw yesterday." About the most I would say is, "I'm going out. I hope I wont be hungry." For some people it is a form of respect for the game not to talk about it as if it was just easy to kill. For other people it just feels uncomfortable to always be talking about ones plans for the future. It is like bragging to them to be saying to other people what you plan to do.

So many Alaska Native children in schools do have pretty definite plans but out of respect for you they feel it is better not to talk a lot about those plans. The best way to respond to this is not to try to make students discuss their plans but to allow them as many options as possible so that they can chose the activities that will allow them to go ahead and develop their own sense of direction.

Many students seem to only deal with life and the future from day to day. How can I get them to make long-range plans?

Since I started thinking about the way many Native people think about planning and talking about planning I have started to keep track of planning activities in my own life and in the institutions that I work in. It's ironic that for all of our concern for advanced planning our plans do not very often materialize. There are ALWAYS changes, reformulations, cost overruns, new plans, contingency plans. I am starting to think that the big difference between Native and non-Native ways of thinking about planning is that we ASSUME that our plans will work and get worked up when they don't and that Natives ASSUME that planning is inherently difficult and so are much better prepared for the changes in direction that always come up.

I am beginning to think that our concern with planning isn't so much a pragmatic aspect of life as a central value in Western society. It's important to present the appearance of good planning, even where we know better. This may be an area of cultural value difference where traditional Native ways of thinking about the subject are really the more pragmatic ways of thinking.

Do our expectations of low achievement become self-fulfilling?

- Yes, I think these expectations often do produce low achievement.

How do we communicate cross-culturally? Are there differences in the way we pause and things like that?

Yes, there are some very big little differences. What I mean by that is that there are some things that are almost impossible to notice or pay attention to that produce very big effects in people attitudes toward each other. Pausing differences have this effect.

Any two people talking to each other usually work on a principle of a back and forth exchange of turns. Between each person's turn and the other's is a slight pause--usually around a second in length. The problem is that when you finish your turn you have to signal somehow to the other person that it is not O.K. for them to take a turn. We do this through intonation, glances, body orientation and so forth. If the other person has something to say, they take their turn at the end of the short pause. If they don't say anything then we go on speaking and take two turns in a row.

Now the problem is when two people expect a different length of

pause between the turns. The person who expects a longer pause will wait their turn and find that the person who expects a shorter pause has already begun to speak again. They thought the other wasn't going to come in. And so in any conversation the person who expects shorter pauses will end up speaking more and more and the other will speak less and less.

Along with this people usually develop attitudes about the other person they are speaking with. They might think that the have nothing to say when in fact they just haven't had a chance to say anything. The other might think the "faster" one was too pushy or talkative or self-centered.

Any two people will be different on the lengths of pauses they expect and any one person will be different from time to time and from situation to situation. Everyone finds himself or herself in situations where it is impossible to get a word in edgewise and everyone also gets into situations where it doesn't seem possible to get others to say anything at all. The factor that makes the difference is the differences in expectations about pausing.

I'm not talking about anything very long either. Typical middle-class Americans average somewhere around 3/5ths of a second in their pauses. "Longer pausers" average about 1 1/5ths seconds in their pauses. That 2/5ths of a second is a big enough difference to lead to one person doing all of the talking and neither person knowing why.

But let me remind you that there are no "slow" or "fast" individuals. It really depends on the situation. Everyone is "fast" in some situations and "slow" in others. The key is in trying to find ways to match up people's expectations about what the right kind of exchange is in any particular situation.

What things might non-Native teachers be doing that are offensive to Native students or their parents?

One of the things valued by many Native people is being very careful in speaking. Many Native people disapprove of careless words and so teach their children to consider things very carefully before speaking out. I think in Western middle-class society we tend to expect children to speak out quickly. We seem to value rapid answering to questions and the ability to "think on our feet". When we encourage this in our Native students many parents feel that their children are being taught to be disrespectful as well as being careless thinkers.

This value on considering carefully before speaking is even more strongly emphasized in dealing with tricky or dangerous situations. For many Alaska Native school children the school is a confusing, difficult, and above all dangerous place. They feel that it is best to consider things very carefully before

speaking and as a result are often thought to be withdrawn or even hostile. It should be understood that this is normally a sign of respect, not hostility.

I should also mention that when you put this value on being very careful in speaking with what I said above about taking turns in speaking you can end up with a Native child not ever having an opportunity to speak at all because when he or she has arrived at a considered answer, someone else has already begun speaking and the discussion goes on to other topics.

How can we improve our effectiveness?

One of the most effective schools in Alaska is a school I know of in which all of the teachers are Alaska Natives from that same village. In this case they are measuring effectiveness by scores on standardized tests as well as other measures such as discipline. In this school the children score very high (much above the national average) on standardized tests. There is also a very congenial atmosphere with very little in the way of discipline problems

Several people have been studying this situation to try to understand what is at the root of this effectiveness. While many factors are involved one thing that was very noticeable in videotapes made of these classrooms was the ways in which the teachers seems to "tune in" to their students. I will only mention here one kind of "tuning in" which was observed. That was rhythmic tuning in.

Many researchers have observed that when people speak to each other they move together in rhythm. It is a kind of dance in which the person listening moves in a regular rhythm with the person speaking. Researchers have observed that head and eye movements and body movements are timed to coincide with the movements and speech of the speaker. Some researchers have even observed this synchrony of movement in newborn infants just 12 hours after birth.

In the research on this particular school what was found was that the teachers were very tuned in to the rhythms of the students and could always be seen to be moving together with them. In other research it has been known that where people are getting along well with each other they are better able to tune in to each other rhythmically. This leads me to think that in this school one of the keys to teacher effectiveness is that the teachers are unconsciously able to tune in to their students in a way that would be very difficult for teachers from outside that community.

But that leaves an important question. What about the teacher who does come from outside of the community? How can that

teacher learn to "tune in" to students? And the answer I would give to that is to think about how it is done in music. When a conductor is trying to get a band to play just a little slower or just a little faster, he doesn't say, "You're playing at 78 quarter notes per minute and I'd like you to pick it up to 80 on the next take." No, what he does is focus on the attitude. He says, "Let's brighten it up!" "Let's put a little life into it," or something along those lines.

I think in a classroom the key to tuning in is the same. We need to concentrate on attitude and when the attitude is positive it'll be easier to tune in to what our students are doing. And when we get tuned in we will find ourselves becoming more effective teachers.

What does a Native student expect from a non-Native teacher?

I don't know. There are some questions I can't answer because as a non-Native I simply can't come at the problem from a Native point of view. Some students, of course, have come to expect the worst and that can make it very difficult for a teacher to break out of that negative attitude and show the student that he or she is working very hard to be responsive.

One thing that many students and teachers have told me and I have seen in my own experience is that we first have to give students some idea of who we are and where we are coming from. We need to let them know as much as possible about ourselves, what we like, don't like, what we are interested in, where we come from, what it is like there, what kind of families we have and what has brought us to live so far away from them and out of touch with the world we have come from. Most Alaska Natives value their homes and families very highly and find it hard to understand why non-Natives seem so impersonal and are so strongly committed to our institutions. Many effective non-Native teachers around the State seem to have developed close, personal ties with the communities in which they are working and I think it is partly that knowledge of them as a person that allows them to be effective teachers.

What is a typical 1981 family life like for a Native student in this community? How is that related to school performance (or is it relevant?)

I think there is a real danger of stereotyping in this question. I can see that it is very important for a teacher to be effective to know as much as possible about his or her students and their lives outside of school....in the same way that it is also important for his or her students to know about the teacher. The problem with this question is that there is probably no typical 1981 family life! Peoples lives are very

different and the effects of even the "same" events may be different on different children.

I would encourage you to try to think in terms of individuals. In most rural schools at least it is really possible to get to know the families of all the children in the school. There is no need to try to summarize this personal knowledge with stereotyping categorical statements.

How does the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act affect our students' sense of goals? Does ANCSA make life look easier to them than it really is?

There may be some misconceptions about the effects of ANCSA. In the first place, when the act was signed into law in 1971 it only applied to Alaska Natives then living who filed for inclusion. That means that there are many Alaska Natives who either were not informed properly and so are not included or who were born since then and so are not stock holders unless they inherit stock from older relatives.

In some sense I would think that ANCSA has made life more difficult for many Alaska Natives. As you may know, Alaska Natives were given 20 years to produce functioning, profit-making corporations. That is no simple task anywhere and it is particularly difficult under the intense pressures from the world resource development interests. For many Alaska Natives there is little freedom to chose employment activities because of the intense need to learn business and economics, politics and government, and all of the other corporation-related areas of knowledge.

One thing is quite clear. No Alaskan, Native or non-Native can affort the failure of the Alaska Native Corporations. They are an intrinsic part of the State economic, political, and social structure and need the support of all of us.

Given the importance of ANCSA I am often struck by how little younger Alaska Natives sometimes know about the legal, economic, and cultural consequences of this act. I think we could do a lot to motivate our students to get involved in activities of international importance by helping them to learn more about ANCSA and the legal and political developments that led to its being signed into law.

How do we deal with the apparent hostility of our Native students?

I think the first thing to remember is that it really may only be apparent hostility. We tend to think of someone who does not

respond as soon as we expect in the way we expect as being hostile. There is the tendency because of the things I mentioned above about pausing and the value of being careful in speaking for non-Native teachers to out-talk their Native students and then suspect hostility of those students because they haven't spoken.

On the other hand, there is some real hostility that needs to be recognized. Many teachers step into situations that they have not created and may not even know about. Communities may have a history of feeling that the school is imposing values and attitudes on their children that they do not appreciate. It is important to learn as much as possible about the particular history of education in your community and what people's expectations are of you. Often that will be difficult for a year or two until the community can be sure of your interest in the community and your loyalty to their children.

How do our students feel we regard them? Is there a problem there?

Some students feel teachers are pushy, bossy, not overly concerned with their needs and interests. Sometimes this is a misunderstanding based on different styles of communication. Sometimes it is simply real. Would you live in that community if you did not receive a high salary and good benefits? In most communities the teachers are the highest paid individuals in the community, have access to really enormous sources of power and goods through the school district, and yet are quite unconscious of how much power they actually have. It is difficult for people in the community to treat you simply as just another person when they know it is that power and those resources which have brought you there and for most of you they also know that if that power and those resources were diminished you would probably leave.

In other words, I think we need to really acknowledge our own motives and not be unrealistic about just how committed we are. Most people can really tell just how serious you are about their needs.

What progress is being made in our district toward hiring Native staff and especially Native administrators?

This is different from district to district and so I can't really answer in general in a way that would cover the whole State. It is important to remember though that normally children around the country are growing up in schools whose teachers and administrators come from their own community and share their own ways of communicating, values, and attitudes. I believe that we will simply never achieve a high level of

educational effectiveness with Alaska Native students until we have many, many more Alaska Native teachers and administrators.

Is it possible that the questions we are asking are the wrong questions? Maybe the way we are asking these questions is already stereotyping Native students. For example, how can we talk about a "typical" Native student's family life?

Yes. Sometimes concern can become a problem in itself. It is not of much use to replace a negative stereotype with a positive stereotype. We have to work as hard as we can to get to know our students as individuals, whether they are Native or not.

What can we do about orientation for new teachers just coming into our district from Outside?

One thing we might do is help set more realistic expectations. I think most teachers coming into the State from outside assume that because Alaska is one of the 50 states it is pretty much the same as the other ones. One teacher I know told me that he had done his first teaching in the Peace Corps in Africa. Before he went they had extensive training including language training and training in the cultures they would be dealing with. Even so it was a big conceptual leap to get into the right frame of mind to understand his students. What he wasn't prepared for was teaching in Alaska. When he came here he felt that the jump was at least as big a jump as the one he had gone through in his Peace Corp teaching but for this one no one had given him any idea that he should be expecting it! It took him a while to get used to the idea and that could have been avoided by just giving him some more realistic expectations about the nature of village life and the culture of the people he was living with.

What is the effect of singling out Native students for scholarships or special Native-only programs? How do they feel being asked how "Native" they are?

Constantly referring to particular students as "Natives" can have a negative effect. People have the right to determine their own sense of identity. Just because Alaska Natives have a common legal identity it is a big mistake to assume that that means they all share the same values, attitudes, and senses of purpose.

On the other hand, there is much inequality left in our educational system, particularly in regards to Alaska Native

people. The programs that are directed toward Alaska Natives are intended to move in the direction of redress these inequities. I believe that these programs are essential and must be continued but we need to learn how to be a great deal more discreet in the ways we determine eligibility and the ways we talk about participation in these programs. We should never let legal requirements be an excuse for losing our sense of common decency in dealing with other people.

Do students feel there is a cultural gap between themselves and their teachers?

Yes and no. I think students are probably quite aware of material differences, ways of dressing, standards of living, and some noticeable attitudes. On the other hand, like most people they are not very aware of some of the subtle differences between people such as in rates of pausing in conversation. In those cases they are probably conscious as we are of something going wrong but are probably not really able to say what it is that is causing the trouble.

I don't think of Native students as Natives but some processes cause singling out. Is cultural awareness causing discomfort?

Again, becoming aware of differences can have negative results as well as positive results. Awareness of cultural differences can and even usually produces some discomfort for both the teacher and the student. I would say though that that discomfort is preferable to requiring students to suffer all of the discomfort without any acknowledgement of what is causing the problem.

What are the issues that Native students are responding to?

I don't really know since I can't speak for Native students out of my own experience. From what many people have told me I would think that many students feel that they are being "chosen" for particular jobs or roles in their communiies and are trying to repond by preparing themselves for those roles. In general I believe that Alaska Native students are quite strongly oriented toward being responsive to the needs of their communities.

How can we improve communication with parents, getting them to come to

conferences and other school functions?

There are a couple of things we might want to pay attention to here. The first of them is that for a lot of Alaska Native people the family is organized differently than for middle-class people from Western society. The grandparents often figure in as people who spend a lot of time with young children, taking responsibility for them and educating them. Maybe we need to consider asking other people than the parents to conferences and school functions.

The other thing is that the conference may not be the best way to get to know the child's caregivers. Sometimes trips or other more social functions are more comfortable places to get to know the child's caregivers and in which to discuss our mutual concern with the education of the children. Because we call them "conferences" we don't want to get locked into thinking they have to have only one particular format. The main point is to get to know the adults who have the interest and responsibility of nurturing the child. Wherever that can happen most effectively is the best place to do it, even if that means in a bowling alley or a school picnic or a potlatch.

School is a verbal place. Native kids and their parents are very non-verbal. What strategies can we use with them? Their non-verbal way of communicating is a handicap in white culture.

Since I've been in a lot of situations with Native kids and their families where I couldn't get a word in edgewise I'd want to be careful not to say that Native kids and their families are non-verbal. The quietness that we see in school might really be a result of other factors, factors such as anxiety about what's going to happen next, or just treating the situation with a great deal of respect. Most often Native children are quiet in situations of either danger or respect. I think the best strategy is to assume that children want to show us respect and respond in kind with respect for them.

One thing that I want to be careful of is the assumption that society is white, middle class. This group may be dominant in having its values permeate our institutions but it is actually in a minority in numbers in the U.S. It is more and more critical, just for the political and economic survival of the U. S. for all Americans to take seriously different ways of communicating. While I would emphasize that ALL Americans need to learn how to communicate with members of other groups I would be cautious about placing all of the burden on members of ethnic "minorities". That would be to create a kind of world-wide cultural isolationism that could be very dangerous in the long run to all of our interests. I would think that members of the so-called "dominant" white culture would be better off to practice our communication skills with members of our own national ethnic minorities before getting into international hot water over

our inability to make others conform to "white culture" standards.

Some of our Native students have limited language and get low test scores. Is there something we can do about that?

There may be a problem with the term "limited language". Usually what this means is that the ability of a person to use A PARTICULAR VARIETY of language is limited, not that they are limited in their overall language ability. The low test scores that we sometimes see are often the result of the fact that our tests are based on facility in a particular variety of language.

At the Kamehameha Early Education Project (KEEP) in Honolulu they have found some pretty successful ways of dealing with the language ability and test scores of Hawaiian children. One thing that they have found is that it is very important to build on the skills that the children have in language other than "Standard" English. They have brought into play a lot of factors, including placing a positive value on the "Hawaiian English" of children to achieve really spectacular improvements in both test scores and attitudes toward school. Their main thrust has been to concentrate their concern for "Standard English" only in the reading and writing portions of their curriculum. Outside of that, teachers and children speak naturally in Hawaiian English and this has developed a very positive attitude. The children are apparently able to accept that "Standard English" will be required IN CERTAIN TIMES AND PLACES but that their own, culturally distinct way of speaking is also being valued by their teachers and the school.

Native kids are not responsive to teaching in the affective domain. What are the differences in culture? Are Native students more community oriented and non-Native students more competitive?

I'm not convinced that Native kids are not responsive to teaching in the affective domain. I think what may often be happening is that what we think of as developing an awareness of values may actually have other "hidden" values concealed. I think children may be reacting to those "hidden" values.

Generalizations are always dangerous...(there's a good example of one right there!). On the whole Native students are probably more community oriented than non-Native students but we want to be careful of what I'd call "positive" stereotyping. It is certainly a traditional Native value to orient oneself toward the community but not every school child who is legally an Alaska Native shares that value. Some Alaska Native children are very competitive and it would be unfair to them to not recognize this as well.

What seems to be important is being sure that our educational activities are not based exclusively on competitiveness nor on non-

competitiveness. Both modes of behavior need to be viable options for our students, whether they are Alaska Natives or not.

What are some strengths of Native kids that we could work with?

While there is the danger of stereotyping, I'd be willing to say that it is a good bet that Alaska Native students will be highly motivated, highly independent students. They are often very acute observers of both natural and social phenomena. Perhaps the favored way of developing knowledge is through peer teaching and other non-competitive ways of learning.

How do Native people handle "problems"? Kids seem to look down and away from us when they are being disciplined.

For many Alaska Native people, direct eye contact is considered very rude and a way of showing direct hostility. For non-Natives, direct eye contact is usually considered a way of showing attention. So when non-Native reprimand people we expect that person to show attention and contrition by maintaining direct eye contact. For a Native student that direct eye contact that we expect could only mean defiance. So we put students in a serious bind. When we reprimand and ask for eye contact we are saying, "Listen to what I say, show contrition, and also show defiance and hostility."

In a study done in Hawaii with Filipino children they filmed a particular child that the teachers felt was a discipline problem. The film showed the child moving around on the fringes of the group, saying very little and also showing very little involvement (from the teacher's point of view) in the activity of the classroom. When reprimanded by the teacher on several occasions the child looked down and away from the teacher. When told to look directly at the teacher, the child refused.

This film was shown to two groups of people, classroom teachers and a group of Filipino adults. The teachers agreed very much that this child was a problem. The Filipino adults who did not know anything about why the film was made felt that this child was displaying "model student" behavior. He was very attentive to the teacher, paid close attention to the lessons and above all, he never failed to show respect to the authority of the teacher. They singled out especially how well he always looked away when he was reprimanded!

I think this is much like what often happens between non-Native teachers and Native students. Behaviors which are meant to show respect for the teacher's authority are misunderstood by teachers as defiance or hostility and the situation just worsens.

Native kids fight their brother's and cousin's battles. I say they should fight their own battles. Is that right?

I'm not sure I have any recommendations about the best sort of fighting. I think it is important to many Alaska Natives to handle difficult situations through some kind of go-between. This may be what one is observing in this case.

How can we emphasize the importance of literacy? They'll need it later in their lives.

In general I think it's important in education to emphasize the current importance of educational activities. We often use the future justification as a way of dodging the question of what our curriculum is all about. For example, we emphasize very strongly in our schools the importance of a good, coherent essay. And yet we know from recent research that very, very few adults in our society every write an essay. Recent research shows that the most common forms of literacy in the adult world have to do with filling out forms. Perhaps next in line is reading and interpreting all kinds of signs. Then perhaps letter writing, even though that is also in decline since the telephone.

What this research means is that our emphasis on literacy isn't really directed toward out-of-school literate activity. We might do better to bring our literacy instruction in line with actual out-of-school needs and then it might make more sense to our students. Just think for a minute how absurd it might seem to a student to ask him or her to write an essay about something when he or she has never ever seen an adult do so.

I might add as someone who teaches graduate courses in education. The biggest single problem I have in teaching is getting teachers to read and write. It could well be that students are quite conscious that their teachers have no more interest in literacy then they have and that they see no point in furthering this hypocrisy.

Ask yourself. When was the last time you wrote something of the sort you are asking your students to write? How did you feel about it?

Native parents may not come to conferences but seem very supportive of field trips. Why is that?

It could be that often teacher-parent conferences have the feeling of "take it or leave it". I know that most teachers don't intend to project a negative feeling but it is a task to be gotten through. Parents may be feeling that they are being asked to "rubber stamp" the activities of the school with no real sense of choice or input on directions. I know that our child's school tells us when the

conference is, where it is, how long it will last, and what we will discuss. That certainly doesn't give me much room to feel that I have many options in the matter.

Trips on the other hand are quite different. On field trips, the teacher and the parent are really closely allied as adults who are sharing the responsibility for the child's safety and education. This puts teachers and parents on a more equal footing and the parents may feel that it is more realistic to bring up points of discussion when the footing is more equal.

What are some differences between Native and non-Native values?

This is hard to answer. There are many differences, of course, but as in all cases of values, there are large values differences among members of any group.

Maybe the most important thing can be called respect. Most Alaska Natives hold the natural world in very high regard. They are very careful in their movements through the world and even in speaking of the world to show this respect. On the other hand, non-Natives value "progress" very highly. This often leads to what Natives think of as a lack of respect. Progress often leads to major changes in the nature of the world as we know it and most Alaska Natives feel that this seriously threatens our respect for the natural world.

One aspect of respect has various terms in different languages. The basic meaning is that one will not brag. It is considered to be very bad taste to brag about our own accomplishments. If they amount to anything other people will see. We don't need to tell them. This poses a problem for a Native child in schools where we so strongly emphasize showing off in so many forms. The child who answers first, the child who speaks up loudly and brightly, the child who most often gets the right answer, the child who has "special" talents not seen in the other children....these are all valued by non-Natives and yet many Natives feel these are all forms of bragging and this behavior is disapproved.

As I have said, this value is not exclusive to Native society but is now somewhat rare in Western society. When I was growing up many people would say something like, "We're going to be leaving on Friday, God willing." This humility in the face of an uncertain future was characteristic of an older generation in Western society but is still strongly characteristic of many Native people.

Are there things that parents don't like that we are teaching their kids?

I believe that the majority of Native parents want their children to a good, solid Western education. They see this as an economic necessity. At the same time, though, as I have said before, most Alaska Natives feel it is important to treat elders with respect and to show respect to everyone by being careful with words, by thinking

out what one is doing and only speaking when one has thought through the consequences. I personally believe that all of us could learn from that, that there is nothing incompatible between a good, Western education and thoughtful, careful thinking.

It is ironic then that we have based so much of our face-to-face responding in schools in quick responses. We seem to always favor the quick response over the thoughtful one. So many of our tests are timed with the emphasis being placed on speed over care. I think this more than anything else is found irritating and unnecessary by Native parents.

What about kids who appear to "take off" in their development at about the third or fourth grade. Why is there this rapid development?

I'm not really sure I understand what is being referred to here. I do know that many Natives feel that it is most important to observe carefully and learn from that before taking decisive action. It could be that students are taking three or four years to observe what is going on in school before making a decision to make an active display of involvement.

How can we learn to recognize cultural differences without becoming patronizing?

This is really very difficult. In our own group values are not relativistic. We are brought up to follow our own group's values very carefully and we define violation of those values as deviance, criminality or insanity. And so it is very hard to accept that someone else has different values without also thinking that they are deviant, criminal, or insane. The patronizing stance is the easiest to fall into. This stance treats others' values as different but at the same time treats those people as inferior. There is also another trap--that of romanticizing the values of some other group. We all know of people who feel that Alaska Natives can never do anything wrong! That is a form of positive stereotyping that can be as dangerous as negative stereotyping.

I have no solution except to be constantly on guard that we are being respectful of others. That isn't something that can ever come automatically because it depends on a constant reading of the needs of the other person.

How can we foster leadership abilities in the talented Native kids we get?

This is very important. We need to look for the positive qualities in our students and do everything we can to develop them. There is

one problem, however. That is that "leadership" may mean different things to different people. If by leadership we mean the qualities of the highly competitive athlete or businessman those qualities may be directly in conflict with the values of some Native students.

I don't think we need to be content with that definition of leadership. It may be the most important quality of a leader that he or she is in tune with the needs of the ones being led. We need to avoid the trap in the word "leader". There is a qualitative difference between the meaning of "leader" in this sense as one who senses the needs of a group of people and helps them to articulate those needs and find solutions and the meaning of "leader" as in the "leader" in a race. In one meaning the leader is trying to tune in to the ones being led, in the other meaning the leader is in competition with them, trying to beat them.

I think Alaska Native leadership generally emphasizes tuning in to the needs of others and seeking to be responsive to those needs. It may be that this sort of leadership is not being fostered in the competitive environment we create in our schools and that may be unfortunate for both Native students and non-Native students.

How do Native students learn?

I wish I could give a simple answer but we have to realize that there is no answer to this question. If it was asked a little differently it would be clear why not. If I asked, "How do students learn?" any educational psychologist would have to admit that we know really very little about this. There are many theories and some are favored in our schools from time to time. But the fact that there are so many theories shows that none of them are really "right"! If there were a really solid theory we'd all be teaching that way because it would work so well we couldn't deny it!

There may be a trap then in this question suggesting that it is somehow possible to say how Native students learn even though it is not possible in general to say how people learn, that Native students or Native people are simpler to understand than other people.

The closest I can come to an answer in this case is to say that many teachers have emphasized the importance of self-directed learning for Alaska Native students. One effect way of teaching is to allow ample opportunities for observation, opportunities in which the student can practice without being closely watched by others, and then opportunities in which the student can use the knowledge in such a way that it is natural and doesn't appear to be showing off. Of course it is difficult to arrange this sort of teaching/learning for all subjects but wherever possible this appears to be an effective strategy.

Would it work to have conferences with grandparents instead of the parents?

In some case this would definitely be preferable. Other extended family member might also be considered.

If students are much slower in responding, is it necessary to make sure they have their turn, even if much more class time has to be given up for them?

It is not possible to give a blanket answer to this question. In some cases "slower" means waiting 1 1/5th seconds instead of 4/5ths of a second. Although that feels very slow to some not accustomed to it isn't very much really. Not enough to throw off a class schedule.

One thing we need to ask is what is our class time for anyway? If a teacher finds that much time is being spent with just one or two students while the others are getting bored or restless then it might be important to allow other, more individualized formate so that those other students will have things to do.

How does one come to a complimentary exchange when time is limited? For example, how do you take enough time when you have only 20 minutes in which to counsel a child?

Some things are conditions of ones employment and I should really say nothing about them. If it is not possible to take the time needed to really effective counsel a child we should think not in terms of speeding up our counseling but in increasing our resources for education.

Realistically, we all work under unreasonable pressures and too often it is the student that suffers. The most common problem in communication is simple misunderstanding of what the other is talking about. It is not the misunderstanding itself that is the problem so much as that we draw evaluative conclusions about others on the basis of misinformation. Negative responses are the most common sign of a misinterpretation and so what I would suggest is that one watch for those as flags that something has gone wrong. In some cases more time will simply have to be taken to get beyond the immediate negative evaluation into what is going on.

To the extent that the primary purpose of getting a public education is to prepare for a successful adaptation to the "work world", to what extent is it imperative to break speech and grammatical patterns that diverge from the "standard English" that most employers value?

The word "break" here is a problem. It shows a misconception about the nature of language. The human mind is incredibly flexible. When it comes to language we find that humans the world over normally are bilingual and bidialectal. In other words, language is not a "habit" which has to be broken to be changed. Any language or dialect is one of many systems of representation and there seems to be no cognitive limit on how many someone can learn to use.

The real limits on language learning have to do with social attitudes. Each language and each dialect of a language becomes associated with a particular group of people. People use their language as a way of identifying with one or more groups and AT THE SAME TIME as a way of showing that they ARE NOT members of other groups. It is an open question whether the positive or negative aspects of identity are more important. I feel that both are quite important.

At Fort Chipewyan, Alberta we were driving along with a group of kids in the car who to our knowledge had no ability to speak on Southern Canadian "Standard English". As we passed one of the teachers from the school these kids started imitating this teacher, mocking her using perfect standard grammar and phonology! In other words, what this teacher couldn't get the kids to do in English class they were perfectly able to do when they were making fun of her.

I would suggest that it is important to realize to what an extent "Standard English" is a badge of identity for middle-class, mostly white Americans. It shouldn't surprise us (even if it might disappoint some) that there are many who simply do not choose to identify with this group.

What's the most effective, practical way for me to learn about communication patterns or differences of the people in this community?

This can only be learned from the people themselves. No outside "expert" can tell anyone how to communicate well. And beyond that there is a particular dangerous thing which can happen. Very often non-Natives wish to learn how to communicate with Natives and use as their consultants other non-Natives. This leaves the way wide open to simply sharing stereotypes.

In my experience I have found that most Alaska Natives are very concerned about communication with non-Natives and are quite willing to help others to understand. We have to remember though that in most communities there have been hundreds (if not thousands in larger communities) of non-Natives arrive, stay a short time, and then move on to other places and other interests. It is hard to believe that this year's new person will really be sincere, really be interested in learning about the community, and especially staying in the community as a committed community member. It takes some time to develop the relationship of trust in which people can risk telling you how much you are offending them. We need to always work toward that while realizing that it may be a slow and difficult process.

To what extent does poverty in itself lead people to have different communication/language patterns? Can a classroom teacher recognize these?

I suppose that poverty in and of itself may not be a direct cause of communication or language patterns. But of course, the way you communicate depends largely on your experience. Your ability to understand someone else depends to a considerable extent on sharing common histories and experiences. People who have very limited economic resources must travel in different social circles. They will frequent different stores, have different entertainments, different aspirations. Teachers in Alaska on the whole come from a middle-class social environment which gives their experience a certain slant which could be radically different from that of their students.

How can I give my students coping (or survival) skills to deal with an unaware and/or hostile social world?

It seems very important not to lie to our students. There is one lie that I believe is particularly troublesome...that is the idea that education will erase all social, ethnic, and cultural discrimination. The fact is that the better educated in Western terms members of ethnic minorities become the more acutely they experience discrimination against them. This is no reason to lower our expectations for students from ethnic minorities. It is a reason to be quite realistic about the nature of the social environment.

Recently at a meeting in which we were discussing problems of interethnic communication and discrimination we were emphasizing the fact that people are usually quite unconscious of the ways in which they are misunderstanding others. Because they experience it so frequently and strongly, members of ethnic minorities often believe that this discrimination is deliberate and yet in most cases it is really quite unconscious. One Alaska Native person at this meeting said that for her the biggest relief she had experienced in years was this discovery that people really did not intend to treat her the way they did. She felt that just knowing this was a major improvement in the situation.

I believe that knowledge is the key to helping students cope with a difficult world and it needs to be genuine knowledge, not the sort of equality-through-education mythology that we so often fall into.

How much individual variance is there among members of the same class and culture in patterns of communication?

There is much individual variation within members of the same class or culture. This is why it is so easy to stereotype, even unintentionally. What needs to be remembered is that what causes difficulties between any two individuals are the differences between them. Any individual whether of another culture or my older sister who comes in quicker than I do in a conversation is likely to irritate me and at the same time think that I am withdrawing from them. The differences I have spoken about exist in all groups. The only thing that makes these things special in Alaska Native education is the fact that children's lives depend on how well their teachers communicate with them.

When you realize a conversation or interview has deteriorated, how can you restructure it for a positive outcome or can you?

This happens frequently. You are about halfway into a conversation or an interview and suddenly realize that it's all going wrong. You are saying things you didn't really intend to say and you suspect the other person is as well. How do you get out of it?

Because of some of the features of timing and turn exchange there is a very good chance that if there is something wrong you have unconsciously introduced the problem. As a general practice I suggest that when things go wrong first assume that you are the one who has introduced some negative element. Somehow you have structured the conversation toward a negative outcome.

That means, then, that you are doing something wrong and don't know what it is (if you did you wouldn't be doing it.) So the solution is not to try to restructure the situation. You don't know what's wrong with the structure so you don't have any idea where to start reshaping it.

Since you don't know what has gone wrong and don't know how to begin restructuring, your only choice is to pay attention to the structure the other person is introducing. If you can find out where they are coming from this will probably give you the clues to why they are reacting to you in the ways they have and will give you a basis for returning to your own idea of what you'd like to do in the conversation or interview.

What kind of situation happens to children when they are mainstreamed into a school that's majaority white and their home is traditional Native?

This often causes severe problems with communication and identity. It is not easy for students to know just which direction they want to go. Sometimes this confusion comes both from the school and the home. I know of one older Alaska Native man who told about how he was punished for speaking English at home but then when it was time to go to the store, he was sent to buy things because he knew

English. This is very difficult for children to receive double messages from their homes and from their schools as well.

On the other hand, many Alaska Natives feel that it is important to maintain a clear separation between white, Western school values and tradition home and community values and would like their children to know both. Like many other members of ethnic minority groups in the U. S., many Alaska Natives would like the school to take care of the Western values and they will take care of the traditional values at home.

It must also be remembered that these attitudes change. We know that our values in educational circles are constantly in a state of change. Every couple of years there is a new wave sweeping through schools changing curriculum, classroom management patterns, even floor plans. We should not expect Alaska Natives to be unwavering in their response to these waves of change. It takes time to understand the changes and then time to consider how one wants to respond.

The main point I would emphasize is that we should be careful not to take out our indecision on the children.

Where does the cultural break take place? How does a Native child who has been subjected to a white culture make the distinction between worlds?

This is certainly not easy, even though I cannot speak from the point of view of an Alaska Native. I have some trouble with the idea of a cultural "break". Cultures change slowly over time. They always have. Individuals have always had to discover and cultivate their own sense of identity. The problem that many Alaska Native students may have is that there are a number of competing identities all clamoring out for adoption.

I think though that in education we have been far too hard on our Native students in thinking that they should have some clear notion of their own identity. It is ironic that this expectation has come from teachers who themselves are in a period of transition. The majority of the teachers of Alaska Native students have just abandoned whatever they had previously known as the normal world, have just traveled into a very different and unknown world. They are often themselves unsure about just how long they intend to teach in Alaska or even just how long they intend to teach at all. There is the possibility that as a way of compensating for this insecurity some teachers are looking for greater security in others, especially in their students. It seems to me quite important to realize that individual students will differ on just how strongly they sense their Native identity. And that may vary from day to day or from activity to activity. It is important to give our students the option to become whoever they choose to be.